

NEWS RELEASE

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DeNUCCI SAYS PUBLIC STILL LACKS FULL ACCESS TO STATE PARKS AND BEACHES

State Auditor Joe DeNucci reported today that the Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) continues to lack controls over its land use program that allows permit holders to maintain cottages in state parks and forests.

In a follow-up review of this long-standing problem, DeNucci's audit found that the general public's access to recreational facilities in Myles Standish State Forest in Plymouth and Lake Ashmere in Hinsdale was blocked by locked gates, chains, fences, and signs warning non-permit holders to stay away. In addition, public health and safety were being compromised because some cottages were in violation of state building codes as well as septic system and wetlands laws, posing a threat to the environment.

According to DeNucci's audit, the barriers to College Pond in the Standish State Forest hampered the rescue efforts of fire fighters and medical personnel responding to emergency calls. In addition, public access to the water was impeded by docks, decks and ramps that had been built across beaches and extended into the water. Many of these structures were poorly built with lumber that had been chemically treated with arsenic, compromising public health and safety and creating a potential liability for the state.

DeNucci's review also revealed that permit holders put up new structures and renovated existing ones at Myles Standish without the park supervisor's permission. Noncompliance with electrical codes also created a fire danger, particularly during the summer when fire risks are high and electrical utilities are receiving heavy use.

In addition, Myles Standish and Lake Ashmere had sanitation problems resulting from the use of outdoor plumbing, which created wastewater that posed a contamination threat to the ponds and ground water at both sites.

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Also, telephone lines were brought into the parks and strung through tree limbs and under water. The lines were installed at many cottages that were not in compliance with building codes. Trash and debris, including an outboard motor that had sunk while tied to a dock at one of Lake Ashmere's permitted cottages, was leaking oil and gas into the lake.

DeNucci's audit further disclosed that septic tank problems that had been discovered earlier at Standish's Fearing and College ponds still existed. Numerous residences have been sold in recent years without Title V Septic Certificates of Compliance as required by state law.

Finally, DeNucci noted that DCR allowed some permit holders to continue using cottages even though they had not paid the required permit fees. There was also no centralized process in place for the collection and handling of these fees and DCR had no records indicating when permits were originally issued to holders.

DeNucci's audits have found similar problems dating as far back as 1989, when the parks were under the jurisdiction of the former Department of Environmental Management. That agency was merged with the Metropolitan District Commission and became DCR in 2003.

"The public pays fees to use these parks and has a right to full access to the trails and ponds," DeNucci said. "The Department of Conservation and Recreation should ensure that these resources can be enjoyed by all, and not just a select few. The department should also enforce all state laws and regulations intended to protect public health and safety as well as the environment."